

To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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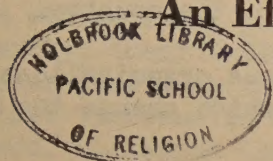
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An Effective Rural Church Program

By Henry S. Randolph



An effective rural church program must be based upon a sound philosophy of the Christian mission. The central concept of this philosophy is the Great Commission of our Lord, "Go ye therefore and teach all nations." This is the voice of Jesus to the Church.

There is no institution in rural life for the teaching and promotion of the Gospel of our Lord among men other than the Church. If rural folk are to be saved through Christ, it will be due to the vitality and effectiveness of the church program. Therefore, under the directive of the Great Commission, the rural church must provide a comprehensive Christian gospel in all of its fullness to the community. The Church must function as a cohesive force in every area and interest of human life. It must provide for the full development and integration of human personality. It must lead the people to accept Jesus as their Lord and to make a personal commitment to the Christian way of life. It must provide adequately for Christian worship, Christian education, Christian fellowship and recreation. It must sponsor righteousness in relation to such matters as home and family life, rural health, race relations, labor and economics, politics, farm and youth organizations. The Church has done these things here and there and done them superbly, but our work has been all too spotty. Assuming this to be our core philosophy, then we shall look briefly at some of the elements in an effective program for our churches and parishes.

1. THE CHURCH AND COMMUNITY

The church or parish must have an intelligent conception of its community in order to build an applicable and effective program. Therefore, it must constantly survey and study its community.

Rural life is dynamic today. It is moving and changing more rapidly than any other segment of our national population. We must keep up with it and

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know what it is doing if we are to build a program which will effectively serve it.

Our machinery is doing in a few hours what formerly required many days. New methods of plant and animal breeding and scientific methods of cultivation have increased production many times. These developments in technology have made it possible for an ever increasing quantity of agricultural goods to be produced with an ever decreasing number of workers. This has lessened the dependence of rural people on agriculture as a means of livelihood. More than half the people classified as rural are engaged in nonfarm occupations.

Our nonfarm rural population continues to grow rapidly. Factories are moving to the countryside. New populations are coming to the country.

Rural communities are becoming larger. Numerous organizations are being formed and new patterns of association have arisen which change the habits and methods of rural people.

It is therefore important, if the rural church is to build a program to serve its community adequately, that it must understand the changes which are taking place in the community and know the nature of the new rural society which is emerging.

In this new rural community of America the Church cannot survive on the basis of its history and traditions, however valuable in bygone days.

Recently we surveyed a group of rural churches in New Castle Presbytery, Delaware, and Eastern Shore, Maryland--the oldest Presbyterian buildings. These churches are dying simply because their energies are spent in glorying in their past rather than in understanding the social and economic conditions of their communities today. Other religious bodies, such as the Methodist, are going into the same communities and making a killing with a new Christian program adapted to our day, while a 75-year-old Presbyterian pastor stands on the steps of his empty church and complains that the Methodists are stealing his young people.

No church has a right to impose itself upon rural society unless it is making a contribution to the enrichment of the human community. Therefore, the program of the rural church must be community-centered rather than communion-centered, built in terms of the basic spiritual needs of the community. This is true of every element in the program.

2. PREACHING

What of rural preaching? It has been believed and practiced by some, even Presbyterians, that just anyone can preach to rural people. It is assumed that rural people are not well educated, that their experiences are narrow, that the uneducated man can meet their needs from the pulpit. We have even ordained such men to preach the Gospel. This whole assumption is false and the result of such practice, except in a few choice instances, has been a travesty on the ministry and a sin against the Church. The rural man at his best is not illiterate. He is likely to know much more about life and how to live it and much more about the Bible than his city cousin, and he is likely to be far more critical.

Elder Bigwill Higgins, a stalwart North Carolina mountaineer with a powerful personality, sat in a pew of a small mountain church one Sunday and

listened to the new minister, freshly-born in Princeton Theological Seminary. The young man preached a great sermon--he thought. He was feeling good about it as he stood at the door shaking the work-stained and encrusted hands of the farm people as they passed out the door. The minister was disappointed in their lack of commendation and praise. Finally, old Bigwill Higgins shook the minister's hand and clasping his shoulder with his massive left hand said, "Son, you did purty good today, but you got a heap to learn about preaching the word of God."

The sermon and worship service must connect the people with their God. Their activities and patterns of life must be re-evaluated by themselves in terms of God's will and purpose for their lives. The sermon, therefore, must aid the people to spiritualize their activities.

Ministers who do not know how to do this sort of thing preach in another-world language. They hold their preaching apart from this fallible human world and take complete refuge in the absolutes clothed in supernatural terminology of the abstract theologian. At times, such preachers have claimed that the farmer, who has labored all week close to the soil and the manure pile, crops and livestock, and the problems connected therewith, goes to church to escape from that toil and the problems of the weekday. To such ministers the Sunday church service is a nirvana--a haven. If we desire a one-day-a-week type religion for our people, that is one good way of achieving it, and it will be a nice performance with no real meaning for human lives.

You will probably agree with me that Jesus was the most soul-searching preacher the world has ever known. What of his sermons? Loaded with absolutes? Clothed with theological axioms? Father, Son, and Kingdom of God, "yes"--but illustrated from and by the common daily experiences of rural life: the fields, the soils, good soil, bad soil, the plowman, seed sowing, tillage, tares, the harvest, barns, sheep, cattle, the husbandman, the shepherds, contractual relations. These came right out of the daily toil, sweat, and experience of the people. Such daily human experiences were the stuff out of which he demonstrated and illustrated the structure of the Kingdom of God. The preacher who will not take time and trouble to discover comparable sermon material out of the daily experiences of his parishioners today, such as soil conservation, soil management and use, bio-dynamic farming, grasses, plants, hybridism, livestock, sanitation, insects, insecticides, water, moisture, modern farm machinery and equipment, farm labor, marketing, processing of raw materials, and professional services, is not fit to preach about the Kingdom of God to rural people today. Therefore, preaching out of rural life situations is an essential element in the effective rural church program.

3. WORSHIP

Our worship in rural churches should be positive, dignified, and thoroughly within the context of the community. A hymn can enhance worship regardless of what book it comes from if the people have learned to love it and can sing it, even if it has the rhythm of dance music and its diction is void of Calvinistic theological phrases. However, people should be taught to experience spiritual ecstasies through the richer and better hymns of the Church, many of which have significant rural connotations--see "Hymns of the Rural Spirit."

The selection of Scripture and prayers used in our worship should likewise be within the context of the rural community. Local and national activities and trends in rural life should hold a vital place in worship. The Bible as a

source book of worship material is a rural book--the living experiences of the people of Bible times should be translated into modern rural experiences. All of this is to the end of spiritualizing the vocational and everyday experiences of the people so that every worthy act of rural life, whether personal or communal, is an integral part of the Christian life. This makes Christianity functional.

4. EVANGELISM

Is the New Life Movement program applicable to the rural church situation? Some of you acclaim it with enthusiasm; some of you disclaim its worth. My advice is to use all you can of it--educational, visitation, pastoral, or mass evangelism--with intelligent modification so as to make it effective in your community. All of us have multitudes of indifferent and unbelieving people in our parishes. It is the business of the Church to touch these lives effectively for Christ. The Church must speak to them convincingly through every one of its members. Any type of evangelism is made intelligible and effective only through an undergirding by teaching and by well-designed Christian activities for those beginning the Christian life. These must be surrounded by Christian love, fellowship, and service.

Gene Smathers tells us that "if religion is to be a qualifying factor in all of life, if the Gospel has implications for every aspect of life, then we must not seek to win persons to it under false pretenses but must boldly proclaim that the call of Christ is a call to his way of life, a call to contribute to the growth of the Christian community." If this statement is true, and I believe it is, evangelism must be given new meaning in terms of redemption of rural life. The task of evangelism then becomes that of hastening the coming of a richer life for the individual, the family, and the community--all of its people, organizations, agencies, and activities. "I am come that they might have life and have it more abundantly."

Every local church and parish should have an outreach program where it can give itself in immediate service and provide a Christian service laboratory for the membership of the church. This outreach spirit should extend to all peoples of the earth through the missionary arms of the Church.

5. CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

Shall we use the Faith and Life Curriculum in our rural churches? This is a much debated issue in certain areas of our Church. All sorts of reasons are given why it cannot be used. The only answer I can give to this question is that the Faith and Life materials are being used successfully in some of our smallest rural churches, including reservation Indian churches. It is true that the curriculum requires new approaches and new skills in organization and teaching, but none which an average person cannot acquire. It requires more planning and preparation on the part of the teacher, which any consecrated teacher should be willing to give to the Church. It requires some adaptation which can be readily achieved in teacher group meetings and conferences. Students of the Bible and Christian education, both in and outside our Church, tell us that they are the best Christian educational materials available today. If these things be true, then draw your own conclusions as to whether or not you should use the new curriculum. This further comment: the new curriculum is not found in the rural church where the pastor is lazy or indifferent to the success of the church's program.

Our rural people deserve the best we can give them in materials, teachers, organization, and methods of teaching. All this to the end that every church should have a well-rounded religious education program for all people, young and old, in the community so that all will be trained to be more active, informed, and enthusiastic Christians with a rich religious life.

The following agencies, and perhaps others, in the community should be recognized, organized, and correlated as Christian educational forces in the parish: (1) the rural family, (2) the Sunday or church school, (3) the vacation church school, (4) weekday school of religion, and (5) communicants' class.

Now a word on the functional aspects of Christian education. As we have implied above, rural people live a functional-activity life. This sort of life is begun early; their activities mean something. The feeding of a chicken, pig, or calf means something to a child as young as two or three years of age, and these activities increase in meaningfulness as the child progresses toward maturity and adulthood. Likewise the planting of seed, the cultivation of plants, the harvest, the marketing, and the storing of food—all these we call creative experiences. Such interests and activities as these should be integrated into the Christian education program. More and more creative activity on the moral, social, and religious training levels should be integral parts of our program. I mean by this that we need to get more meaningful activity with a social significance, real work projects, into our Christian education program throughout the Church.

This program of education calls for a leadership training program in every parish: to train Sunday school superintendents, vacation and weekday church school leaders, Sunday school teachers, etc. We now have excellent materials and other ways for achieving this. And it must be done if we are to move into our rightful heritage.

6. OTHER PHASES OF OUR PROGRAM

If time permitted, I would like to talk about a creative-activity program of rural church finance, of rural church publicity, of church buildings and equipment, and finally a streamlined organization program for our day in rural America. But there is not time in this program.

I wish to conclude with this statement. We are fortunate as rural church leaders in the Presbyterian Church in having a blueprint of an effective rural church program. It happens to be on a yellow sheet, rather than a blue sheet, and with it is a set of specifications for a complete and effective program. The program-building architects have worked long and hard on this. It has developed section by section out of actual grass root experiences. They have employed all the elements for such a structure prescribed by the General Assembly and the several agencies of the Church. They have also incorporated in their design and specifications the art of the rural sociologist and philosopher. They have utilized many consultants.

Consequently, they have given us the very best available in rural church program-building in these achievement goals for town and country churches. This has been created and given to us by the Presbyterian Rural Fellowship. It is new. It is dynamic and, when used, it has power to lift any rural church out of the doldrums, the status quo, into a church with dignity, self respect, influence, and power in the life of the community, so that it will become recognized as a church of distinction by its presbytery and synod. Therefore, if you do not want your church to grow, you dare not use these achievement goals. It needs to

be said that these plans are not perfect nor final. The Presbyterian rural architects will create bigger and better designs with your cooperation and on the foundations of your successes. But remember, when better program designs are created for building the Kingdom of God in rural America, you, the rural leaders of the Presbyterian Church, will be the designers and the builders.

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